

# "G.I. Joes in Barbie Land": Recontextualizing Butch in Twentieth-Century Lesbian Culture

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High school years are much harder on butches [than on femmes]. Femmes passed as straight, even to themselves. Butches can't. We stick out like G.I. Joes in Barbie Land.

—Jeanne Cordova, "Butches, Lies, and Feminism"

Straight people call me sir and faggots cruise me, but other butches say: "Aww, you're not so butch." That's cuz I don't go for femmes like I'm supposed to. This confuses people. When I'm out with a femme buddy, everyone assumes we're on a date; when I'm out with a butch date, everyone assumes we're buddies. That's if I can even *get* a date, which isn't easy for someone like me.

—Trish Thomas, "Straight People Call Me Sir"

The two passages cited here in epigraph point out a number of reasons why an exploration of butchness might be fruitful. Jeanne Cordova and Trish Thomas's words leave us with more questions than answers about butch: Why might a butch have conflicting notions of what it means to be butch? Why do people make the facile assumption that butches must be attracted to femmes? Can a butch be defined without reference to her "natural" counterpart, the femme? In this paper we seek to address these and related questions, because we believe that butchness has been inadequately described, explained, and theorized by contemporary scholarship.

Butch is a concept that has long permeated lesbian culture: nearly every lesbian, regardless of her self-identification, is at least familiar with the term.<sup>1</sup> JoAnn Loulan writes of her experiences giving talks about lesbian sexuality: "I ask the following: 'How many women here who have been lesbians for longer than two weeks, have not ever rated yourself or been rated by others on a butch/femme scale?' At the most, five percent of the audience raises their hands" (42–43).<sup>2</sup> Current scholarship tends to focus on the butch-femme dyad, usually either emphasizing its historical significance for the lesbian community or decrying it as an outdated imitation of patriarchal gender roles that fails to embody feminist values.<sup>3</sup> Even within these and other related debates, however, the term "butch" remains ill-defined. Can anyone be a butch just by saying so, or are there certain criteria a woman must meet before she can be called butch? Does a woman need to self-identify as butch in order to be butch? Is a lesbian

butch because of how she looks, who she is attracted to, who is attracted to her, or because of what she does in bed? All of these questions have been answered in conflicting fashions by various writers, leading to numerous dissenting concepts of what constitutes butchness. We believe that by examining the context in which butch and butch-femme occur today, and by analyzing current scholarship on the topic, we can unravel some of this confusion.

Our agenda for this paper is to clarify and ultimately radically reorient the prevailing conceptions of butch. We do this by examining the common definitions of butch and showing that the term, despite its flexibility, is not a word with limitless applicability. In this process of redefinition we explode the myth that the butch is characterized by the object of her desire. Examining two common ways butch is perceived—as the aggressor in sexual encounters and as desiring femmes—we demonstrate that neither is a fundamental component of butchness. Most important, we show that butch is a singular identity position, not a coupled one—that butches should be viewed independently from any possible relationship to femmes. We believe that butch identity and butch-butcht relationships have been largely ignored by scholars in favor of concentrating on the more culturally predominant butch-femme relations<sup>4</sup>. Our premise is that butch and femme are not always interdependent terms, each requiring the other. Rather, butch and femme are simply two expressions of gender that can, but do not necessarily, intersect. We shall, however, need to focus on butch-femme at times, since much of the available material only discusses butch in this manner. Our subject positions as butches, and as butches who are primarily attracted to other butches, provides us with experiential knowledge that informs our approach to gender theory: our interest in this topic is derived from an awareness of the gaps in current theory that deny and invalidate our personal experience, as well as the experiences of other butches like us.

## What Is a Butch?

“A butch is someone no one understands and no one can explain.”

—Mike, the main character in Jay Rayn’s novel *Butch*<sup>5</sup>

Among lesbians “butch” is used to describe a vast realm of attitudes, behaviors, appearances, and actions. For instance, Cherríe Moraga writes, “To be butch, to me, is not to be a woman. The classic extreme-butcht stereotype is the woman who sexually refuses another woman to touch her” (Hollibaugh and Moraga 400). Another woman states, “Part of identifying as butcht stems from a desire to defend, protect, and defy the traditional feminine stereotype” (qtd. in Loulan 34). For De Clarke “being butcht is an ethical choice, a choice of resistance. . . . It’s more than a preference in clothes, jewelry, shoes; more than a haircut” (“Femme and

Butch" 98). These three descriptions show the wide range of ideas that women have about what constitutes butchness. Some women consider being butch to be primarily a matter of one's sexual behavior, and in particular one's desire to be the dominant individual in sexual activities. Others see butch primarily as a means of resisting the cultural norms for feminine behavior. Given the large number of ways in which a lesbian can appear butch, it is no wonder that lesbians are confused about what exactly makes a butch a butch; as Susan Ardill and Sue O'Sullivan comment, "The absence of any precise or agreed definition about what butch and femme are produces endless heated arguments among lesbians. . . . [T]hese two words . . . have become dreadfully overburdened. They have to be infinitely elastic terms" (80). Yet, although few lesbians can agree on the precise definition of butch, most do agree about who is or is not butch;<sup>6</sup> thus there must be some specific, observable characteristics a lesbian must display before she will be labeled butch. In this section we elucidate the fundamental components of the butch image today and show that there are limits placed on butch identity, limits that make it impossible for anyone who so desires to claim to be a butch.

For much of the twentieth century, lesbians as well as nonlesbians have perceived the butch largely, although not entirely, in relationship to the femme, the butch's assumed "natural" partner. In the 1940s and 1950s, participation in the butch-femme lifestyle was de rigueur for many lesbians, especially working-class or young women, but such roles fell out of favor in the 1960s and 1970s, when many lesbian feminists condemned them as replicating patriarchal relationships. Butch was seen as male-identified, and femme was seen as selling out to the traditional feminine stereotypes of women. Androgyny replaced butch-femme as the cultural imperative in the post-Stonewall lesbian feminist movement. Ironically, many aspects of this androgynous ideal were indistinguishable from butchness: wearing comfortable, nonconstrictive clothing such as flannel shirts, jeans, and hiking boots; sporting short, boyish haircuts; and acquiring skills from male-dominated trades such as carpentry and auto repair. While butch-femme roles never completely died out, particularly in rural or working-class communities, butch-femme culture saw a resurgence, in altered form, among urban upper- and middle-class lesbians in the 1980s. "Butch" and "femme" had now become broader and more fluid in meaning. More butch styles, such as clothing inspired by the punk movement, were being created and adopted. A sense of the theatrical inspired some women to express their butch or femme images in glamorous and highly visible ways. Instead of being the standard of lesbian identity, butch and femme were two options for the expression of lesbian gender. Butch and femme were also a way for lesbians to challenge the lesbian-feminist status quo. "Many young women who claimed butch or femme identities in the 1980s saw themselves as taboo-smashers and iconoclasts," writes Lillian Faderman (*Odd Girls* 263–64).

To some women familiar with the butch-femme culture of the 1950s, these neo-butches and -femmes appeared to be merely playing with roles that had once been an integral part of identifying as a lesbian. Faderman writes about the 1980s, "for most lesbians the roles are not the life-or-death identity they often were in the 1950s, but rather an enjoyable erotic statement and an escape from the boring 'vanilla sex' that they associated with lesbian-feminism" ("The Return" 593). The apparent lack of seriousness attached to these roles leads some scholars, such as Faderman, to argue that butch and femme have ceased to be terms with discrete meanings: "Butch and femme today can mean whatever one wants those terms to mean. A woman is a butch or a femme simply because she says she is" ("The Return" 594). Although there is little doubt that butch and femme roles have become far more flexible today than they were forty years ago, we question Faderman's belief that butch and femme today are entirely subjective terms. We also wonder whether we can say accurately that the contemporary butch is merely making "an enjoyable erotic statement," since butches still suffer harassment and abuse for stepping outside of the traditional feminine role. Although butches certainly do not make up the entire lesbian community, they are frequently the ones who bear the brunt of homophobic attacks against lesbians. As Judith Butler notes in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, "we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (140). This punishment takes many forms, ranging from overt violence to covert discrimination. All butches endure such castigation—even if a particular butch has not fallen victim to physical violence, she has almost certainly experienced verbal harassment.

Since the butch is such a prominent figure in lesbian culture, we object to claims that the term has become "infinitely elastic" or "totally subjective"—after all, an infinitely elastic term has no meaning at all. Though definitions of butch may appear to be hopelessly divergent, our research revealed patterns in how butches are usually described. We studied a broad range of texts, including first-person accounts, lesbian literature, the theoretical statements of writers such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Sue-Ellen Case, and Judith Roof, and the works of historians such as Lillian Faderman, Joan Nestle, Madeline Davis, and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, and found that definitions of the butch tended to fall into some configuration of the following four categories: she is a masculine woman, she is like a man, she adopts an active sexual role, and she desires femmes. Yet must a lesbian fall into *all* of these categories to qualify as butch? By examining carefully the meanings and implications of the four categories, we hope to answer this question, distilling some core elements of butchness, in the pages that follow.

## **“I Just Can’t Relate to That Wanting to Look like a Man Trip”**

The first category—masculinity—is generally accepted to be an essential foundational element of butchness. A woman who usually expresses herself in a traditionally feminine style is rarely, if ever, thought of as a butch by other lesbians. When one of JoAnn Loulan’s audience members declares a lesbian to be butch, it is because this lesbian appears visibly masculine in her dress, physical appearance, or carriage. According to Gayle Rubin, butch is “a category of lesbian gender that is constituted through the deployment and manipulation of masculine gender codes and symbols” (467). Lesbians have associated masculinity with butchness throughout much of the twentieth century, and masculinity continues to be crucial to a butch’s self-presentation today. Emphasizing the butch’s masculinity permits the flexibility needed to account for the “nineties butch” without invoking Ardill and O’Sullivan’s “infinite elasticity,” since many lesbians are more comfortable with feminine appearances and attributes than with masculine ones.

But “masculinity” is itself an ill-defined term, one that describes a vast variety of appearances, behaviors, and attitudes that are commonly considered to be expressive of maleness: “Forms of masculinity are molded by the experiences and expectations of class, race, ethnicity, religion, occupation, age, subculture, and individual personality. National, racial, and ethnic groups differ widely in what constitutes masculinity” (Rubin 470). Various historical periods have different definitions of masculinity as well. Masculinity, in short, is a set of signs that connote maleness within a given cultural moment, and masculinity is as fluid and changing as the society defining it. No one universal presentation of masculinity exists in our contemporary culture. A corporate lawyer presents a different image of masculinity than a rodeo bronco rider. A football player presents a different image of masculinity than President Clinton. An English professor presents a different style of masculinity than a punk rocker. Nor will all these men agree about the masculinity of the others. Class, race, ethnicity, and geography all shape how masculinity is perceived.

Not surprisingly, butches draw much of their style from the culture around them. Clothing is one of the most obvious and notable ways that a butch displays masculinity. Leather jackets, men’s shirts, suit jackets, pants, ties, and shoes are all part of the butch sartorial iconography. But the role of butch clothing is complex. We can better understand the significance of clothing for butches in light of Dick Hebdige’s study of punk subcultures in England, in which he refers to the use of mundane objects to form a distinctive punk style:

On the one hand, they warn the “straight” world in advance of a sinister presence—the presence of difference—and draw down upon themselves vague

suspicions, uneasy laughter, “white and dumb rages.” On the other hand, for those who erect them into icons, who use them as words or as curses, these objects become signs of forbidden identity, sources of value. (2–3)

As do the English punks, butch lesbians use clothing as a way to indicate membership in a group; butches are easily recognized as lesbians because both lesbian and heterosexual cultures typically interpret masculine appearance and clothing, particularly when combined with few feminine signifiers such as lipstick, makeup, long hair, and jewelry, as indicators of homosexuality. Being butch is thus a way to announce to the world, “I am a lesbian.” Since lesbians are, for the most part, invisible as a group, the ability to recognize, and be recognized by, other members of the lesbian subculture is vital to creating a sense of belonging, not only for the butch but also for all lesbians who see and recognize her.

What makes a butch a butch and not just a woman in men’s clothing is a combination of factors, including her self-presentation and her self-perception. Lesbians identify many different subcategories of butch, all of which are related to varying degrees of masculinity. The ubiquitousness of the butch-femme scale in lesbian culture is an example of this awareness of diversity, as it allows for several “levels” of butchness. Some extremely masculine women, such as the proverbial “diesel dyke” are easily labeled butch. The “soft butch” may look less macho than the diesel dyke, but her personal style leans toward the masculine, and she dresses and wears her hair in ways that are coded as butch.<sup>8</sup> An androgynous woman, such as k.d. lang, is trickier to categorize on the basis of appearance alone, but this does not imply that lang cannot be butch, since butchness is dependent on a variety of masculine signifiers.

Being butch is more complicated than merely slipping on a man’s suit and tie; it also entails adopting behavioral patterns that are typically perceived as nonfeminine. The butch’s carriage and demeanor are as much a part of her masculine image as is her clothing. The most famous literary example of a butch’s masculine image is found in Raclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*. Although she certainly does not represent all butches, Hall’s heroine, Stephen, is one idealized image of how a butch should appear: “[Her] figure was handsome in a flat, broad-shouldered and slim flanked fashion; and her movements were purposeful, having fine poise, she moved with the easy assurance of the athlete” (72). Her face is handsome, but there is “something about it that went ill with the hats on which [her mother] insisted—large hats trimmed with ribbons or roses or daisies, and supposed to be softening to the features” (72). Hall’s description of Stephen highlights a key component of what distinguishes a butch: the butch is *comfortable* with masculine identifiers, and most likely uncomfortable with feminine ones. She feels attractive and sexual in her pants and boots, and silly in lingerie. Her preferred clothing reflects her perception of herself.

Yet we must account for the variations that occur in a woman's life. Rubin notes that "there are at least as many ways to be butch as there are ways for men to be masculine; actually, there are more ways to be butch, because when women appropriate masculine styles the element of travesty produces new significance and meaning" (469). To further complicate matters, each lesbian is exposed to different ideas about what it means to be butch on the basis of a number of cultural variables. The white Harvard graduate might have a different way of showing her butchness than does the Chicano working-class lesbian living in Central Los Angeles, although both might be influenced by similar ideologies about what constitutes a butch. Still, the questions remain: is there some minimum of masculinity required to be a butch? Which combinations of traits distinguish the butch from the femme who can fix cars? How do we tell the difference between the androgyne and the butch, or explain why the masculine straight woman is not a butch?

No clear-cut answers exist to these questions, but several factors help to distinguish the butch. First, it is apparent, after discussing the butch's masculine clothing, image, and attitude, that the butch must repeatedly present/create herself as butch in order to be butch. To borrow Judith Butler's words, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33). If we apply Butler's definition, butchness is a repeated production of the body's image following certain cultural conventions about what it means to be butch. We concur with Butler that butchness, like any other display of gender, is constituted by regular performance; the butch's butchness is dependent on her adopting various masculine signifiers that identify her as "butch" both to herself and to other lesbians, and it is the repetition of this display that distinguishes the butch from the lesbian (or heterosexual woman) who wears a tuxedo to a party one Saturday night. Second, by claiming masculine identifiers for her own use, the butch sets herself apart from the "average" heterosexual woman by failing to present herself as traditionally feminine in order to appeal to the male gaze. While no woman has control over how a man will look at her, a woman whose appearance is designed to gain the sexual attention of men is not butch, even if she is tough or has a masculine occupation. Under this view, the heroine of *La Femme Nikita*—a French film about a female assassin—would not qualify as a butch. Nor would the models crowding the pages of *Vogue* or *Glamour*, even when they are wearing men's clothing.

Such an approach would seem to rule out the possibility of a heterosexual woman being butch. But what about a figure such as Lieutenant Ripley of the *Alien* films? She's tough, she's in control, she's wearing a uniform just like the men are. But because she is a heterosexual, she cannot be called a butch. As Alisa Solomon notes, butches are "dykes

with such objects or attributes as motorcycles, wingtips, money, pronounced biceps, extreme chivalry. Straight women with such objects or attributes are just straight women with motorcycles, cummerbunds, biceps, etcetera. The difference is audience" (37). For butch as a lesbian gender category to exist, its audience must recognize and understand the signs of butchness. This is why heterosexual women, no matter how butch they might act or appear, cannot be butch. Were Ripley to say to her shipmates, "I'm a butch," they likely wouldn't know what she was talking about since butch is a concept and an identity that has cultural relevance to lesbians but rarely to heterosexuals. So while Ripley looks butch, and acts butch, Ripley is not a butch.

Still, the masculine heterosexual woman shares with the butch the rejection of feminine gender roles, surely she suffers some of the same harassment as does the butch. After all, when a woman adopts a masculine identity, she challenges the association between masculinity and maleness. A female body with masculine carriage, in masculine clothing, confounds the meanings of terms like masculinity, woman, male. Butler, discussing the butch, argues in *Gender Trouble*:

Within lesbian contexts, the "identification" with masculinity that appears as butch identity is not a simple assimilation of lesbianism back into the terms of heterosexuality. As one lesbian femme explained, she likes her boys to be girls, meaning that "being a girl" contextualizes and resignifies "masculinity" in a butch identity. As a result, that masculinity, if that it can be called, is always brought into relief against a culturally intelligible "female body." (123)

As Butler points out, within the dominant conception of gender, the butch makes no sense: her female body ultimately transforms masculinity in a way that makes it nonintelligible to heterosexual society. To the "straight mind," as Monique Wittig calls it, the butch's masculinity comes as a shock. The butch does not conform to social expectations of what constitutes womanhood, thus throwing into question basic assumptions about people and their place in the world. Given this, we would expect the reaction of straight society to all female masculinity, be the perpetrator heterosexual or homosexual, to be hostile. Such is not the case, however. Mary Laner and Roy Laner studied which traits of a lesbian make her appear most negatively to a heterosexual audience. Examining people's responses to hyperfeminine women, average feminine women, and hypofeminine women, Laner and Laner found that heterosexual feminine women were the most liked group and were frequently described by such adjectives as normal, agreeable, and nice (349). The least liked group of women were masculine homosexual women, who were categorized by such words as unappealing, disagreeable, and hostile (349).

Theorist Judith Roof provides a lucid explanation of the relationship between lesbianism, masculinity, and heterosexual hatred:



perceiving lesbians as masculine reveals the threat to masculine supremacy and to a heterosexual system lesbians potentially pose. The representation of the lesbian as masculine is thus two-edged: a put-down, it also encapsulates the very instability of gender prerogatives that undermines heterosexuality. For this reason, attributions of masculinity to lesbians are often expression[s] of anger and anxiety about a de-centering of phallic privilege. (248–49)

Roof's words are particularly applicable to the butch, the embodiment of this stereotype, and the anxiety that Roof describes is the root of the antipathy expressed by heterosexual society toward the butch. The butch's appearance announces that she does not belong or wish to belong in a society that expects or demands femininity in women. Further, by adopting a conspicuously masculine image, the butch also rejects the role of woman-as-commodity, to be exchanged and bartered by men. As Alisa Solomon explains, the butch refuses "to play a part in the heterosexist binary" (36). She fails to adopt the feminine appearance and behavior that identify her sexual availability to men. In our society, femininity is frequently "expressed through modes of dress, movement, speech, and action which communicate weakness, dependency, [and] ineffectualness" (Devor 51). The butch rejects this vision of womanhood, and in doing so becomes an outcast.

### The Female Man<sup>9</sup>

At first, the second category—that the butch is like a man or wants to be a man—seems to differ little from category one. However, the two categories are actually quite distinct, since masculinity does not necessarily entail a desire to be a man. The stereotypical perception of a butch as being "like a man," a view held by both homo- and heterosexuals, is a manifestation of the larger cultural discourse that defines "woman" as a conflation of "female" and "feminine" and that assumes "woman" and "man" are exclusive opposites. The butch's failure to follow prescribed gender norms means that she is disqualified from the category "woman," just as for Monique Wittig in "One Is Not Born a Woman" the lesbian is not a woman, because, in refusing heterosexuality, she denies the binary system that defines "woman." Hence, in the heterosexual reality, the butch—a not-woman—must therefore be like a man, though she cannot *be* a man because she does not possess the correct anatomy. As Jacquelyn N. Zita points out, in writing about why males cannot be lesbians, "This body is not only a thing in the world, subject to physical gravity, but a thing that carries its own historical gravity, and this collected weight bears down on the 'sexedness' of the body and the possibilities of experience" (126). Applied to the butch, Zita's words suggest that, by virtue of her female body, the butch will have different life experiences and expect-

tations than will a man. For example, a man does not experience the social pressure to be feminine that a butch does. Men are not worried about being raped the way women, even butches, are. As women, butches are still often considered less intelligent and capable than their male coworkers. Butches are raised to be women, are treated like women, and suffer the stigma of not looking and acting the way women are expected to: all these factors and more shape butches in a way that is radically different from the experiences that constitute men.

While heterosexual society sees the butch as “play-acting” the role of man, and considers her lack of physical maleness to be a failure, in actuality the butch’s transgressive behavior exposes the artificiality of social constructs about sex and gender. Thus we can reinterpret a claim such as Moraga’s that “a butch is not a woman” as an extrapolation from Simone de Beauvoir’s observation that “woman is made, not born”: for Moraga, the butch, while female, is constituted differently than is a woman. It could be said that the butch is neither man nor woman, since she fails to fit into society’s conventions about how men and women should look and act. We do not wish to suggest, however, that the butch is born “butch”; while there is always the possibility that biological factors may have an influence on her development, the butch is very much constructed through her interactions with other lesbians.

Even so, the butch is raised and lives within a largely heterosexual society, and cannot help but be affected by it. Not only is she inundated with images of masculine males and feminine females—and a cultural obsession with maintaining this congruence—but the butch may occasionally, or even frequently, be mistaken for a man. Even as commonplace an act as going to a public rest room can be a difficult experience for the butch, one that is memorialized in many pieces of lesbian writing, such as Judy Grahn’s poem “Edward the Dyke.” Edward’s trouble, as she explains, is “chiefly concerning restrooms,” as it is on the day when three middle-aged housewives mistake her for a man invading a department store’s powder room. In Lee Lynch’s novel *Toothpick House* the butch heroine, Annie Heaphy, is sharply admonished by another woman, “This is a ladies’ room, sir” (4). The butch, as a result of being frequently mistaken for a man, comes to feel defensive about her right to enter this “women’s” space, where sex/gender solidarity is supposedly openly expressed, because though she has the correct anatomy required for entrance, she fails to conform to the social conventions for decorating that anatomy. As lesbian cartoonist Alison Bechdel points out, the butch can become confused about her own sex as a result of constant social misapprehensions (see fig. 1). The experience Bechdel describes is one with which any butch lesbian can empathize.



Figure 1 © 1986 by Alison Bechdel, *Dykes to Watch Out For* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books)

From the foregoing examples of the butch and the bathroom, it becomes clear that a butch is affected by how society views the image that she projects. Judith Roof's analysis of how lesbian identity is influenced by cultural configurations can help us better understand how butch identity is constructed in a similar fashion. Roof writes:

The relation of [the] cultural imaginary to individual women is complex, as women internalize imaginary configurations while at the same time producing images that confirm the configurations. Configurations help define the lesbian and help the woman identify herself as a lesbian, though like other kinds of stereotype, they never quite succeed in thoroughly containing her. Depending on cultural variables such as class, education, age, race, ethnic

group, geographical location, historical context, and even accidents such as whom they know when, women internalize or accept aspects of these configurations. (244)

It is impossible to imagine the butch constructing her image in a vacuum. She, like any other lesbian, constantly discovers that her butchness is shaped and altered by how both homosexual society and heterosexual society perceive her. Some butches internalize the message that lesbians want to be men, and so for them being butch is about being like a man. Yet not all lesbians are so profoundly affected by stereotypes of lesbians and butches. For them, the myth of butch-as-man fails to explain fully their own experiences and is seen as a cultural misapprehension. Even so, commonly being mistaken for a man because of her masculinity will likely affect the butch's self-perception to one degree or another.

### **The Butch on Top**

The third category—the butch as sexual doer who receives her pleasure from giving pleasure to her partner—must be explored if we are going to unlink butch from its connection to desire, a necessary step in altering the perception that butch is only half of a coupled identity. One of the common ways the butch is defined is by her supposed role as the active agent in sexual encounters, a role exemplified in Moraga's discussion about the extreme stereotype of the butch, also known as the stone butch. In the 1950s and 1960s, being the active sexual partner was often considered one of the defining characteristics of butchness—a butch who “rolled over” in bed might be called a femme by her peers and suffer loss of status; the stone butch was the epitome of the 1950s butch, a figure that “became a publicly discussed model for appropriate sexual behavior, and it was a standard that young butches felt they had to achieve to be a ‘real’ or ‘true’ butch” (Davis and Kennedy 433).

But the stone butch is no longer the exemplar of butchness, nor are there the same kinds of cultural sanctions against butches who wish to be the recipients of sexual attention. Personal ads in almost any big-city gay newspaper reveal numerous butch “bottoms” (and femme “tops”) seeking partners. For these lesbians, the fact that their preferred sexual positioning is an inversion of what was once considered the norm for butches does not affect their sense of gender identification at all. While “butch” still connotes the active sexual partner to many lesbians, the acceptance of the butch bottom is a noteworthy shift in cultural expectations; the years between the “heyday” of butch-femme and its resurgence in the 1980s saw several changes in gay and lesbian culture—ranging from more numerous mainstream representations of lesbians in films and books to

the expanding academic debate about gender in the lesbian community to the growth of a more diverse, radical young lesbian culture influenced by AIDS activism—changes that plainly affected lesbians' conceptions of butch. One significant factor that contributed to this shift is the increased visibility and vocalness of lesbian sadomasochists.

When Second Wave feminism became the dominant ideology of the middle-class lesbian community, as Lillian Faderman and other historians argue, attitudes toward sex changed as well. In the mid-1970s, "feminist sex," many lesbians thought, required equality between partners; butch-femme sex, seen as a replication of unequal heterosexual roles, was thus patriarchal and antifeminist. In the extreme, butches and femmes were perceived as engaging in what Sheila Jeffreys later called "an erotic communication based on sado-masochism, the eroticising of power difference" (179). But in the late 1970s, the real sadomasochists started coming out of the closet, arguing that there was no conflict between feminism and sadomasochism. The ensuing "sex wars," which periodically resurfaced throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, had a tremendous influence on many lesbians, affecting their perceptions of sadomasochism, butch-femme, and sex in general. The works of Pat Califia, JoAnn Loulan, Gayle Rubin, and Susie Sexpert, as well as others, and the emergence of lesbian erotic publications such as *Bad Attitude*, *On Our Backs*, and *Quim* all helped to expand conceptions of what constituted acceptable, healthy sex for lesbians, though S/M sex has never been accepted by the lesbian community at large as normal or desirable.

These "sex wars" had an impact on the butch in at least one crucial way. Over the years, more material became available that portrayed lesbian sadomasochism in a positive light, the most influential work being the groundbreaking *Coming To Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M* by SAMOIS, a San Francisco-based lesbian-feminist S/M group. Encouraged by such publications, some lesbians, particularly young urban lesbians who felt dissatisfied with "vanilla sex" and who wanted to experiment with sexual power play without necessarily embracing the S/M lifestyle, adopted S/M concepts, such as "top" and "bottom," as positive additions to their sexual repertoire. As the negative impact of at least some of the vocabulary of sadomasochism was reduced, the term "top" became available to denote a lesbian who preferred to "run the sex," reducing the burden formerly carried by the word butch. This transition affected butch sadomasochists as well as their "vanilla" counterparts: lesbian masochists, as well as lesbians who simply enjoyed being the recipients of lovemaking, could claim the identity butch without conflict, thus further destroying cultural conflations of sex, gender, sexuality, and desire. Just as femme lesbians demonstrate the fallacy of theories of inversion, the butch bottom exemplifies the distinction between sexual positioning and gender.

## Butch Desire

You gotta have a femme under your arm at all times.

—Trish Thomas, "Straight People Call Me Sir"

The fourth way in which butches tend to be defined is the one that has received the least critical scrutiny in current scholarship on butch identity: it consists of the assumption that butch and femme are interdependent opposites, like the yin and yang of Taoist philosophy, bound together, as Ardill and O'Sullivan and Thomas all note, by the energy of sexual desire. Under this view a butch is a butch because she finds femmes erotic and appealing, and a femme is a femme because she is sexually attracted to butches. For example, Loulan writes, "It's impossible for us to get away from the fact that butches and femmes are in opposition. This doesn't mean that they are completely different, only that there is an opposing force in the other that each finds to be an erotic turn-on" (125–26). Amber Hollibaugh concurs: "butch/femme is an erotic system. It's deeply based in an erotic definition" (qtd. in Loulan 26).

But not all butches agree with this assessment: "You're expected to like femmes, if you're butch," one lesbian writes, "it's part of the 'like a man' myth, as far as I can see. . . . [but] I'm no more comfortable with most femmes than with straight women" ("Femme and Butch" 97). We suggest that butch should not be a term that must inevitably and "naturally" appear along with femme. The conception of butch-femme interdependence has historical roots dating back to the beginning of the century. Turn-of-the-century sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis along with Sigmund Freud believed that masculine women would be attracted to feminine ones. For instance, in "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" Freud wrote that among women, "active inverts exhibit masculine characteristics, both physical and mental, with peculiar frequency and look for femininity in their sexual objects—though here again a closer knowledge of the facts might reveal greater variety" (145). Even much later in his career, when he grew less sure that lesbianism always necessitated physical masculinity, Freud still insisted in "Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" that his lesbian patient, despite not showing the "bodily traits and mental traits belonging to the opposite sex" (154) that lesbians "normally" possessed, still displayed a "masculine" attitude toward a "feminine" love object.

This idea has been remarkably persistent, and although we recognize and appreciate the importance of butch-femme relationships, we do not believe they are the only way to understand butchness (or femmeness). Rather, we maintain that butch can be interpreted more precisely if we divorce it from the butch-femme bipolarity, which has acted as a stranglehold on theorists who have tried to produce new ideas about what it means to be butch in the 1980s and 1990s. Scholars such as Loulan,

Hollibaugh, and Nestle fall into the trap of limiting their discussions to butch and femme as a dyadic system, failing to recognize that butch can be a signifier that has little to do with femme, or even with sexuality at all. As one butch we know comments, "if I was celibate for the rest of my life, I would still be butch."

The idea that butches and femmes are a matched set is so predominant even today that many lesbians uncritically assume that butches *must* be attracted to femmes. For instance, Loulan, in her lengthy survey of butch-femme identities, asked her respondents in one question, "If you identify as butch, choose three words to describe aspects of femmes you find erotic," a question that presupposes that butches *will* find aspects of femmes erotic (250). Yet even Loulan admits that among the respondents to her survey, only 50 percent of the butches expressed an attraction mainly for femmes, while a full 25 percent of butches expressed an attraction mainly for other butches. If Loulan's figures are correct, then the theoretical focus on the butch-femme couple presents a very skewed view of reality.

Loulan's implicit erasure of the reality of butch-butcht desire is only one example of this type of elision. On a more theoretical level, Sue-Ellen Case, in her essay "Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," postulates butch-femme as an ideal feminist subject position, one that provides "agency and self-determination to the historically passive subject" (65) while at the same time positioning her outside dominant ideology. Case writes

the butch-femme couple inhabit the subject position together—"you can't have one without the other," as the song says. The two roles never appear as . . . discrete. The butch-femme as subject is reminiscent of Monique Wittig's "j/e," or coupled self, in her novel *The Lesbian Body*. These are not split subjects, suffering the torments of dominant ideology. They are coupled ones. (56)

Yet in building her argument Case begins with the assumption that butch and femme are linguistically indissoluble, thereby overlooking the possibility of even more disruptive and powerful constructs than butch-femme. For while butch-femme gains its subversive strength from its parody of heterosexual couplings, "providing [the subject] with at least two options for gender identification and, with the aid of camp, an irony that allows her perception to be constructed from outside ideology" (65), other constructs, such as butch-butcht, go a step further by also destabilizing constructs of heterogendered desire and homosexuality as well.

While butch and femme are most certainly linked by virtue of the fact that they arise in a culture for which gender is a dyadic system, this does not presuppose that the cultural representation of gender encompasses all variations of gender in existence, or that the relationships between genders are limited to those that are culturally sanctioned. Indeed, the very

existence of homosexuals, hermaphrodites, butches, and queens is ample evidence of the fallacy of the cultural conflation of sex, gender, and sexuality; to persist in the argument that butch and femme are, or should be, symbiotically intertwined ignores reality and only replicates the dominant ideology.

Case, Loulan, and other critics fall into the trap of upholding the prevailing perception that desire itself is essentially heterosexual; as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains, "desire, in this view, by definition subsists in the current that runs between one male self and one female self, in whatever sex of bodies these selves may be manifested" (86–87). In such a system, the desire of butches for other butches is impossible, a state of affairs that results in an inaccurate view of what it means to be butch in our culture. To borrow Sedgwick's words, "To alienate conclusively, *definitionally*, from anyone on any theoretical ground the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire is a terribly consequential seizure" (26). By assuming that part of what constitutes a butch is her attraction to femmes, we deny butches this authority; we also deny masculine lesbians who are attracted to other masculine lesbians the right to claim butch as an identity.

Although Bidy Martin writes about an erasure of being that lesbians in general must confront, her words are equally applicable to the erasure that butches experience: "We are not always confronted with direct, coercive efforts to control what we do in bed, but we are constantly threatened with erasure from discursive fields where the naturalization of sexual and gender norms works to obliterate actual pluralities" (95). We must be aware of how sexual and gender norms work within society at large and within the many diverse lesbian communities that marginalize lesbians who differ from subcultural norms. For instance, the very existence of butches who are passionately attracted to other butches is frequently ignored, if not denied outright. When such butches do become visible, they are often seen as abnormal, as in the novel *Cass and the Stone Butch*, where Jacko thinks that Cass, a butch, is "perverted to like [those] butch types" (Azolakov 46). There is no difference between this sentiment and the notion that lesbianism is perverse; both attitudes are designed to maintain the status quo. The denial of butch-butth desire and eroticism is symptomatic of a society that refuses to recognize that sexual desire does not exist only between a self that is gendered masculine and one that is gendered feminine. Butch-butth desire negates the binary oppositions female/male, self/other on which Western culture is based, and hence is tremendously threatening.

The elision of butch-butth desire is apparent in lesbian films targeting a mass audience. *Lianna*, *Personal Best*, *Desert Hearts*—all of these movies star at least one, if not two stunningly attractive and very feminine women. None of the films feature two butches, and two of them focus exclusively on the relationship between two feminine women who could



easily pass as straight. Sexuality between two feminine women is far easier to contain, since such imagery has a long tradition of representation in heterosexual male pornography, in which the illusion always exists that a man will suddenly appear. With two butches, a man appears superfluous, and perhaps even endangered. A related reason why butch-butched desire is not represented in mainstream movies or other media forms is that butches fail to fulfill heterosexual ideas about what is attractive and sexually appealing in women. At least up to the present, mass-market lesbian films have been carefully crafted to include lesbians who could be as desirable to heterosexuals as to homosexuals, ensuring a broader audience. In addition, butch-butched eroticism raises the specter of male homosexuality, which might offend and confound the audience.

Given the slim representation of lesbianism in the mass media, it is hardly surprising that butch-butched desire has been largely invisible. More curious is how rarely butch-butched eroticism is represented in the lesbian media. In films, newspapers, magazines, and novels, one sees countless images of the butch-femme couple, but the butch-butched couple is rarely represented. Even in erotic videos produced for the lesbian market, like those created by Fatale Video, one constantly sees femme with femme or femme with butch in such videos as *Hungry Hearts* and *Suburban Dykes*, but only rarely butch with butch. This erasure denies that butch-butched relationships are as significant a part of the lesbian community as butch-femme relationships.

A few critics have nonetheless given attention to erotic relationships between butches. Gayle Rubin notes that butch-butched eroticism is not uncommon, but

lesbian culture contains few models for it. Many butches who lust after other butches have looked to gay male literature and behavior as sources of imagery and language. The erotic dynamics of butch-butched sex sometimes resemble those of gay men. . . . Many butch-butched couples think of themselves as women doing male homosexual sex with one another. (472-73)

An even more singular view of butch-butched sexuality than Rubin's is Jan Brown's opinion that when two butches "hook up . . . sexually" they are "faggots" (414). Both Rubin and Brown are attempting to do something worthwhile, to show that butch-butched sexuality *does* exist and must be accounted for in a different fashion than butch-femme sexuality. They seem stymied, however, when it comes to defining butch sexuality in a way that exemplifies butches' lesbian identities. By suggesting that butches who are erotically interested in other butches are modeling their behavior on that of homosexual men or are actually "faggots" themselves, Rubin and Brown distance butches from "normal" lesbians who engage in "normal" lesbian sex. More insidiously, they are classifying butches who are sexually attracted to other butches as not even lesbians but something

else completely; while some butches might find this attitude appealing and alluring, others might find that such a theory positions them as outsiders to the lesbian community. We are critical of such an approach to butch sexuality and argue that when two butches engage in sex, no matter what the practice, they need to be seen as two women engaged in lesbian sexuality, not gay male sexuality.

Butches who desire other butches are difficult to theorize in accordance with traditional lesbian imagery for writers like Rubin, Brown, and others, because the numerous social restrictions on acceptable forms of desire make it hard to come to grips with something as multiply transgressive as the butch who desires other butches. Two female bodies having sex violates the myth of "natural" heterosexuality, female bodies in men's clothing violates gender restrictions, and female bodies in (or out of) men's clothing having sex with each other constitutes a triple whammy. The butch-butuch couple confounds all of these conventions, which is why butch-butuch makes even some lesbians uncomfortable. Trish Thomas describes what can happen when a butch pursues another butch: "She wonders if I've mistaken her for femme. . . . She becomes concerned that she's throwing off femme vibes without even knowing it. . . . And suddenly she gets this overwhelming urge to arm wrestle" (22). Butch-butuch sexuality is constantly being assimilated back into familiar categories, as with the butch who worries Thomas must be picking up "femme vibes" or Brown's description of butches having sex with other butches as "faggots."

Despite such overwhelming conceptual resistance, butches, unconcerned with theoretical disputes, continue to desire other butches. Look down Castro Street any Saturday evening, and you are likely to notice a number of butch couples strolling by. Visit a chic lesbian bar in San Francisco, and you are apt to see two leather-jacketed, buzz-cut young women clinging to each other on the dance floor—and they will be far from alone. Might butch-butuch even be getting *trendy*? The increasingly apparent presence of butch-butuch couples points out the curious location of butch desire today in lesbian communities across the United States. On the one hand, the existence of butch-butuch relationships still tends to be ignored, denied, or minimized. On the other hand, butches involved with other butches appear to be moving increasingly into the spotlight. As media overexposure causes other forms of lesbian relationships to become more accepted, women who wish to transgress social expectations, whether lesbian or nonlesbian, seek new avenues for sexual expression. Butch-butuch relationships are one means of so doing. But we do not mean to suggest that butch-butuch sexuality is merely the trend of the season and will quickly disappear when a newer trend surfaces. Quite to the contrary, we believe that butch-butuch couples, like other sexual radicals, are altering our conceptions of lesbian identity and desire.

## Butch and Beyond

Being butch, as we have shown, affects every moment of the butch's life because she lives in a culture dominated by the myth that gender is a biologically determined behavioral manifestation of anatomical sex. The butch who refuses to pass as nonbutch—a "G.I. Joe in Barbie Land"—is, in many situations, a social outcast who might be denied jobs, professional advancement, or social acceptance because of her appearance and actions. It is this persecution that provided the incentive for us to write this essay.

We have shown that it is masculinity, not sexual desire and choice of sexual object, that should be the chief identifying trait of the butch. As we have argued throughout this paper, masculinity, in one form or another, inevitably identifies the butch. Given the fact that much of what has been said about the butch can be reduced to her adoption of masculine signs, it might be best to simplify how we see her. Associating the butch with her masculine display rather than with her choice of sexual partner frees the butch up to have sex with whomever she wants in whatever way she desires while still avoiding the trap of "infinite elasticity."

Finally, we hope that our paper has exploded the "natural" assumption that butches almost always belong with femmes. This false claim works to negate the experiences of many butches (and femmes). Recognizing that butch-femme is only one of myriad different relationships that function in lesbian communities frees up both "butch" and "femme" as terms that are sometimes, but not always, connected. Questioning the all too common linkage of these terms does far more than merely question the way these terms work in language. It ensures that femme-femme or butch-butcht relationships are regarded as "normal," as are butch-femme relationships; a butch, like Trish Thomas, who likes other butches should not be regarded as "suspect" and "the ultimate threat" because she prefers sexual involvement with other butches. Her sexual expression should not be treated any differently than that of a butch who finds femmes more sexually appealing. As lesbians, we need to make sure that we don't create definitions that function to delineate who is a "proper" lesbian and who is not. Articulating what elements make up various queer identities, from the butch to the femme to the pansy boy to the clone, is vital to understanding how gender is produced and performed among homosexuals. Exploring the many facets of such homosexual images also helps to elucidate the virulent homophobia that some of these individuals, such as butches, experience.

Breaking the linkage of these words also brings to light new thoughts about how gender operates among lesbians if being butch doesn't mean that one must necessarily possess a femme counterpart. The subversive relationships between butches and butches or femmes and femmes are

held up as relationships that might say as much about how gender and sexuality function in the lesbian world as does the relationship between butches and femmes. These relationships should not be considered insignificant, and they deserve more scholarly attention. Studying such "marginal" relationships will help us better understand the multiplicity of ways lesbianism is defined and constructed by both homosexuals and heterosexuals.

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## Notes

1. A history of butch is beyond the scope of this essay, but a brief explanation is useful. It is impossible to state with great exactness when butch became a clear identity. The historian Martha Vicinus argues that the "mannish lesbian," a forerunner to the butch, appeared in the early 1800s (480). In the nineteenth century and even earlier some women, such as George Sand, Rosa Bonheur, and Harriet Hosmer, dressed and acted in a mannish fashion and were undoubtedly precursors of the twentieth-century butch; but they lacked the politicized notion of themselves as both butches and lesbians. By the late nineteenth century, sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis stressed the masculine appearance of the typical female invert. Ellis commented, "The commonest characteristic of the sexually inverted woman is a certain degree of masculinity or boyishness" (244). Some historians, such as Lillian Faderman, have suggested that cross-dressed "inverts" in the 1890s were the first "conscious 'butches' and 'femmes'" (*Odd Girls* 59) but these women may not have had a self-conscious perception of themselves as butches and femmes.

Butch and femme roles were commonly found in the white working-class lesbian subculture of cities in the 1920s (Faderman, *Odd Girls* 80). As the century progressed, butch and femme roles became even more prominent. By the 1940s and 1950s, butch-femme roles were essential for many lesbians, particularly working-class or young women. As Elizabeth L. Kennedy and Madeline Davis write about the mid-twentieth-century working-class lesbian culture in Buffalo, New York, "butch-fem roles were what we call a social imperative" (*Boots* 244).

2. The butch-femme scale is similar to (and possibly derived from) the Kinsey sexuality scale. The scale ranges from one to ten, where one represents an extreme expression of femininity and ten represents the extreme of masculin-

- ity (in some parts of the country the poles are reversed). A rating of five-and-a-half is perfect androgyny.
3. For exceptions to this rule see Burana and Linnea, Lamos, Rubin, and Solomon.
  4. Many scholars have focused almost exclusively on butch-femme relationships. For histories of butches and butch-femme relationships, see Bullough and Bullough, Davis and Kennedy, Faderman, *Odd Girls* and "The Return," Jeffreys, Nestle, "Butch-Fem," and many of the articles collected in Nestle, *The Persistent Desire*. See Weston for a contemporary analysis of butch-femme roles.
  5. Other fictional accounts about what it means to be a butch include Antoinette Azolakov, *Cass and the Stone Butch*; Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*; and Lee Lynch, *Toothpick House*.
  6. Loulan describes an exercise in which she asks a random member of the audience to come to the front of the room and then has audience members, most of whom do not know the volunteer, rate the position of this woman on the butch-femme scale. "The fact that the audience is for the most part in agreement indicates to me that there is a collective opinion about where a woman fits on the butch/femme scale" (44).
  7. Qtd. in Loulan 113.
  8. At different points in time, popular boys' haircuts, such as the D.A., the crewcut, and the flat top, have all been adopted by lesbians as butch haircuts. Actually, any short "boy's haircut," which makes no attempt to camouflage itself as a pixie cut or any other girl's hairstyle, is a butch look. What constitutes a butch haircut is influenced by the butch's age and her class, ethnic, and racial background. A lesbian who came out in the 1950s might still wear her hair in a D.A., while a young 1990s butch might shave the sides of her head. Butch haircuts are constantly evolving.
  9. With thanks to Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*. Marilyn Frye makes the following observation: "The term 'female man' has a tension of logical impossibility about it that is absent from parallel terms like 'female cat' and 'female terrier'" (86).

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